

Jeremiah 8:18-91
Psalm 79:19

1 Timothy 2:1-7
Luke 16:1-13

Jesus parable of the unjust steward is a difficult one to understand. A rich man discovers that his manager had been squandering his wealth, so he fires the manager. What exactly the manager did, we do not know. That put the manager in a bad position. He is not going to dirty his hands or ruin his image even more by going around begging. He makes deals with the debtors to ingratiate himself to them. He reasoned, "People will welcome me into their homes." Before word went out that he was no longer the manager, the manager went to two debtors of the rich man, reducing their debts. One debt he cut in half, another debt he cut by twenty percent. Astonishing, the rich man commends the crook for "acting shrewdly." Say what? The manager reduced the debts of these people, thus cheating his master, the rich man, out of money. And the rich man commends him? Did I miss something here?

The manager was shrewd for what he did was to align himself with these debtors so that, out of gratitude, they would provide him hospitality in the future. In reducing their debts the manager ingratiates himself to the debtors. He would have a place to stay and food to eat. The owner's compliment thus acknowledges that the manager has him over the proverbial barrel, and has saved himself in the process. The manager was a shrewd man. Confusing? Yes.

However, the concluding verse to our passage is abundantly clear: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Why does Jesus condemn materialism so harshly? There are numerous places in the gospels when Jesus makes harsh statements about wealth. Many reasons can be given.

When money is given first place in our lives, we are practicing idolatry, placing things above God. Donald Hinze, in his book *To Give and Give Again*, wrote: "Does anyone question that for First World people of privilege, that is, most Americans, the sacred mission has become the acquisition of money and accumulation of assets? Private profit is the goal more cherished than public good. The quest for money and possessions is as fervent, personal and private, as a religious endeavor.... Money and material things become the graven images of our idolatry."

Secondly when we prioritize material possessions, we also do great damage to God's creation. The world's growing consumption of the earth's resources is not sustainable. As one researcher said, 'Most of the environmental issues we see today can be linked to consumption.' The production, processing, and consumption of commodities requires the extraction and use of natural resources, such as wood, ore, fossil fuels, and water; it requires the creation of factories whose operation creates toxic byproducts, while the use of the commodities themselves create pollutants and waste. Our consumption of the world's resources is simply unsustainable, and the poisoning of soil, water, and air is literally killing us. Yet, economists warn us that a drop in demand for products brings on economic recessions or even depression, along with massive unemployment.

Third, when we love money more than God, ultimately we waste our lives in a worthless pursuit to accumulate more and more stuff-stuff we think we need but that ultimately becomes a burden and is thrown away. The more you get, the more you have, the more you hunger for more. Milan Kendra, the author of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, writes that what the middle class thought "would be a better life, gained

through hard work and material accumulation, is proving not only to be more difficult to attain than they had imagined, but also less satisfying when it is attained." You have heard me tell the story of a woman who asks her husband, "Who is happier? The man with twelve children or the man with \$1 million?" He thought for a moment and said, "The man with the twelve children/" She responded, "Why?" He replied, "Because the man with \$1 million wants more." We never think we have enough.

In the King James and Revised Standard Version we read: "You cannot serve God and mammon," "Mammon" is translated "wealth," in the version we read today. The economy of mammon is one of excess accumulation for some and poverty and deprivation for others. Compare mammon to manna. Manna refers to the story of the Exodus in which God rains down bread from heaven. Each day there was a white, bread-like substance on the ground. The Hebrews were instructed to gather what they needed for the day. If they collected too much, it was foul the next morning. In this system of manna everyone had enough. Mammon is the economics of excess and deprivation, while the economics of manna stresses God's abundance of abundance and provision. In God's economy there is enough for everyone.

There is an old Indian parable about a guru who had a star disciple. The disciple lived in a little mud hut. His only clothing was a loincloth. He lived simply, begging for his food. Each week, the disciple washed his loincloth and hung it out to dry. One day he found his loincloth eaten and torn by rats. He begged the villagers for another loincloth, and they gave it to him. But the rats ate this one too. So he got himself a cat.

That took care of the rats, but now he begged for his food and for milk for his cat. So he got a cow to feed his cat, but now he had to beg for hay to feed his cow. So, in

order to feed his cow, he decided to till and plant the ground around his hut. But soon he found no time for contemplation, so he hired servants to tend his farm.

Overseeing the laborers became a chore, so he got married to have a wife to help him with the farm. His wife did not like the mud hut he lived in and demanded a real house. So the man had to grow even more crops and hire more servants to keep his wife happy. In time, the disciple became the wealthiest man in the village.

Years later this man's guru was traveling nearby, so he stopped in to see his old student. He was shocked at what he saw. Where once stood a simple mud hut, there now loomed a place surrounded by a vast estate worked by many servants. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked his disciple. "You won't believe this, sir," the disciple replied. "But there was no other way I could keep my loincloth."

It's easy to get sucked into a materialistic lifestyle of accumulation. Jesus does speak harshly about wealth. He warns that it will be easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than to make it to heaven. Jesus tells us that if we want to be his disciple, we must give everything away. Obviously we need to keep some possessions for ourselves. But we must not make possessions the focus of our lives. To be a disciple requires responsible stewardship, a stewardship that strives to see to it that all have enough to live. God's abundance does not mean abundance for a few. Rather, it means abundance for everyone. Being a disciple means living simply so that others may simply live!

Blessed be the Lord our God. Amen.